

Zeroing In

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It was 25 years ago this October in Reykjavik that Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and U.S. President Ronald Reagan came as close to banning nuclear weapons as Nikita Khrushchev and John F. Kennedy had come to using them in October 1962.

Gorbachev and Reagan understood that nuclear weapons had gone from deterrent to danger. The possibility of miscalculation and accident increased with the number of weapons. Gorbachev kept a small statue of a wild goose in his Kremlin office to remind him of the time when Soviet radar mistook a flock of geese for an incoming missile.

Earlier this month, Global Zero, a movement calling for total nuclear disarmament, organized a “summit” at the Reagan Library in California for the 25th anniversary of the Reykjavik summit. Among the featured speakers were Republican stalwarts like former U.S. Secretaries of State James Baker and George Schultz. The choice of venue and speakers displayed both a sense of history and political savvy. No one could accuse this of being a liberal group, with the exception, perhaps, of former President Jimmy Carter.

There are obvious questions: How do you get Israel to disarm when it doesn't even admit to being a nuclear power? What deals can be made with terrorists? Can anything be verified in Pakistan — even the weather?

Those questions are addressed by Global Zero's four-stage plan to "achieve the phased, verified elimination of all nuclear weapons" by 2030. No matter what, that process begins with the United States and Russia, which still control about 95 percent of the world's remaining 23,000 nuclear weapons. In April 2009, Presidents Barack Obama and Dmitry Medvedev committed their countries "to achieving a nuclear-free world." But nothing will happen, especially in the United States, without the pressure of mobilized public opinion.

Global Zero, however, seems to have a problem reaching a wider audience. It did produce a serious and frightening documentary, "Countdown to Zero," that explores the dangers of nuclear incidents — theft, terrorism, miscalculation — in the post-Cold War world. The movement needs a face, and it can't be Schultz's or Carter's. The likeliest candidate is former undercover CIA agent Valerie Plame Wilson with her all-American good looks, romantic past and thoughtful yet sassy manner.

Countering nuclear proliferation is central to Wilson's life. After the Soviet collapse, both the CIA in general and Wilson in particular were adrift without a clear mission. Combating nuclear proliferation to rogue states or terrorists filled that gap both for the organization and for her. When her husband Joe Wilson, former ambassador to Iraq and Niger, blew the whistle on the Bush administration's claim that Saddam Hussein was trying to buy yellowcake from Niger, the White House took revenge by outing her, Carl Rove calling her "fair game," which became the title of her memoirs and a film based on it.

In the film "Countdown to Zero," as well as in public appearances and interviews, Wilson highlights the financial insanity of maintaining nuclear arsenals whose cost worldwide is estimated at \$1 trillion per decade. That could buy a lot of schools and infrastructure.

The Occupy Wall Street demonstrations in New York and elsewhere have been commended for their orderliness and idealism. But they have also been criticized for lacking vision and specific demands. If Global Zero could connect with that movement's energy and passion while lending it ideas and direction, a mighty force could be unleashed in the United States. Perhaps agent Wilson should be dispatched at once to Lower Manhattan.

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